

# ! m a g a z i n e



SPRING 1996





winners of the art and photo contest

front cover: grand prize winner - melissa fortunato, "sky"

inside front cover: second prize winner - shirley stevens, "untitled"

inside back cover: first prize winner - lisa arcangeli, "untitled"

# *i magazine*

SPRING 1996

The literary magazine of  
Mount Wachusett Community College

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*For Doug Anderson*

*- the inspiration for much of*

*'what goes on beneath the manicured lawns'.*



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is

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## stale air

I remember  
my mother's  
perfume, the one I could only wear on Sundays,  
the bottle had a bright pink cap and a  
spiral shape, fit perfectly in her hand  
and barely in both of mine. A little  
dab behind each ear, that's all  
I was allowed. I broke the bottle.  
It fell off the bureau, and smashed.  
The familiar fragrance of rushed  
Sunday mornings lingered  
in the air for weeks,  
making the scent, and Sundays  
too common

*Nancy Courtemanche*

## lost ending

the street screams  
announced the bullet  
inside her chest.

a knock-knock  
on the bathroom's  
door told me the news.  
with my pants  
on my knees  
i swam  
in a river of tears  
to get to her house.  
i see a leaf falling  
and sirens inside my head  
transport my soul  
to the same darkness  
of eight hears ago.  
why lumarie? why?

*iIneabelle Perez*



## my favorite things

Books with fine pages and pages of fine stories,  
Music that soothes me or tells of man's glories.  
The smile of a child with an upturned face  
The sound of quiet when I'm in my own space,  
These are my favorite things.

The chatter of birdsong as morn comes to greet me,  
And rays of its sunrise as it rises to meet me,  
Of births and deaths of blooms as I watch them in awe,  
And I think as my hourglass submits to God's law,  
These are my favorite thoughts.

A Christmas tree dressed for the gazers' delight,  
A manger's reminder of that one fateful night,  
A Savior that died with his arms outstretched wide,  
The emotion of gratitude that keeps stirring inside,  
Are a few of my favorite things.

The touch of my husband, my partner in life,  
Of sharing, of laughter, of loving through strife.  
The joy of a grandchild, love's waiting surprise,  
My sons, my loves, thank God for their lives.  
These are my favorite things.

Friendship that embroider my life with their threads,  
Of fun, and of trusting and sharing other's bread,  
Conversations, the breezeway, the prayer, picnics, too,  
Of church, and of work and of home, precious, too.

These are my favorites, how about you?

*Lorraine Wickman*



## in the dreams of angels

passion welling love flowing all around lost in a  
neverending spiral of silk slipping and sliding scented of  
raspberry kisses and the gentle flow of breezes in a  
confusion of wings and white robes while the clouds  
spin into a whirlwind of cotton candy the roses wind  
around bodies no end no beginning a continuous circle  
the thorns bring no pain but the sweet ache of true love  
chastity of the mind her heart is flying souls are one and  
heaven is but a heartbeat away only the mourning  
doves knew of a bliss so stinging and we fall into the  
spiral of life purity remaining our hearts have wings  
and we know we can only dream of being angels

*Annmarie St. Cyr - 1995*

## untitled

changes made  
feelings flow  
bright lights fade  
children grow  
flowers bloom  
people play  
cloudy room  
different day  
man walks  
long hall  
woman talks  
last call  
nobody heard  
thoughts spoken  
strange word  
mirror broken

*LV*



## shades

*(for Doug A., whose courage gave me inspiration)*

i am haunted by the shades

shades of diluted reflections of emotions already spent  
and of things best buried

shades of reminders that tap me on my  
shoulders lest i forget.

vampires - they drink deeply on the blood of fear  
in my veins - greedily licking their lips afterwards

true to what they are  
they do not transverse the light of fresh thoughts  
free speech or total consciousness

but dwell within the corners of my mindseye  
roaming unchecked in the dark alleyways of unrehearsed thoughts

feeding beneath the "bamboo bridges" of my soul  
satiated with suppression and depression

wicked, wicked spirits waiting for the exorcism that must  
eventually come.

*P.S.*

## masks

the masks of terror is a small child  
cowering in a dark corner  
the mask of innocence is a small child  
skipping in the sunshine  
the mask of anger is a small child  
stamping her feet  
the mask of love is a small child  
holding her mom's hand  
the mask of me is silent

*Wendy Ruggiero*





ars poetica

poems contain poems  
as if what we wear will wiggle  
wiggle  
lifetimes  
little black dogears  
on pictures  
a sealy posturepedic  
pomegranate in the sand  
oceanfoam  
sickening thought  
footnotes in a song  
sticky words  
risque as eyebrows  
plucked  
fat tucked  
granite  
finite

*Cara Goldsmith*

untitled

what goes down with you?

what will you take when the earth covers your beauty?  
for every memory a stone  
for every lover a rose.

that face hidden in cold soil.

what will you take?  
shall I go with you?  
shall we be one?

so fierce that you will not be conquered.  
so quiet to suffer alone.  
your skin so fair.

fading...

as every lover does.

*Shealagh O'Shea*



## when will he be home?

we were not allowed to speak your name  
for fear that it would cause her pain  
to picture you in her mind's eye  
she'd search our faces without a smile

did she see you in us?  
or did we fill her with disgust?  
whatever thoughts she had of us  
you were her firstborn, her baby, her love.

across the pond you had to go  
in search of fame, fun and gold  
and although she tried to hold you back  
your words to her were "i'll be back"  
so off you went that sunny morn  
from a house in dublin to a new york snow storm

by going before you broke her heart  
and left us the pieces to pick apart  
and now she sits beside the fire, your picture always by her side  
when often by chance the phone would ring  
i'd hear her say and almost sing  
"ah, sure that's kevin now, calling me today, all the way from americ-k"  
"hush now mom" i would say "kevin's not in america,  
kevin's been dead for twenty years."

*Jackie Diodato*

## untitled

i look up  
to find the comet  
but it has moved  
east since last night,  
nearer the horizon.  
tomorrow it will  
be gone and not be back  
for ten thousand years.  
we will be gone  
in much less time  
and we will be lovers  
even more briefly.  
i walk quickly  
back into the house  
to call you.

*Anonymous*



untitled

she hovers, lingers by his side  
while he, eager, glides anxiously ahead.  
then, guiding her to his revered river's edge,  
he whispers, "flutter gently past the marsh  
so's not to sir the mating frogs."  
he shows her where the two paths cross,  
then merge, near the fallen oaks.  
caressing his wings, she follows;  
easing down the slippery slope.  
they crouch behind the stout stumps  
and stalk the ducklings gliding unaware.  
half-distracted by the velvet  
draped upon the rotting trunks,  
they cling to saplings  
and trespass through the sedge  
around the dozing beaver's lodge.  
high atop the limestone dam  
they listen to the boundless bluster  
rising from the foamy froth below.  
she coos, intent, as he puffs on  
about his dauntless valor  
when, as a fledgling,  
he soared like a skilled cock;  
first across, then back;  
aloft, above the glaring waters!

*Dolores Valeri*

untitled

what i would give  
to be inside of you,  
a man-  
to feel you  
as you feel me,  
cradled in warm night,  
touching every  
internal star.

unjust it is  
that there is no  
passage for me  
into that country,  
where i would see things  
mere eyes cannot perceive.

*Angela Maderias*



## when i am an old man

when i am an old man  
my neighbors will call me strange and weird  
i will wear hats with wide brims made of straw  
or plaid flannel  
i will braid my hair with feathers and jewels  
my car will be conceptual  
my house will have ideas of its own  
and my chair will know me like no other  
i will carry a black leather sack  
my belt will be made of silver blue mirrors  
my shoes will click like castanets  
my vest will sparkle like ballroom dancers  
and my rings will seduce mysterious young women

when i am an old man  
my neighbors will call me strange and weird  
but because i have money  
some will say i'm only eccentric  
diplomats eager not to offend  
will remind them of the dues i've paid  
the kindly will call me entertaining  
and my children will say i'm charming  
in order to assure their inheritance

when i am an old man  
i will eat sunshine for breakfast  
and dine by moonlight  
i will play my music loud  
fart when i feel like it  
and conduct my garden with a baton

and when i pass into whatever  
the neighbors will say  
from the prisons of their suspicion  
"that weird old man died yesterday"  
and feel the chill of their empty cells

*James Pelletier*





## say what john ?

i am in my room one night trying to get a song down. i figured out the bass and have finally got the lyrics down. i'm playing and singing the song and have gotten it all together well enough, but it just isn't right. i realize it's my voice that's out of whack. it's not that i am singing out of tune but rather realize that a man's heavy voice is all wrong for this song. a *merry*, yes a *merry* should sing it.

i'll try to explain what i mean by that. i had been out earlier that night listening to a two woman acoustic set. the singer was well practiced and talented. her voice, transported me to a soporific place. it was not booze, it was beauty of the vocal that had me captivated. this is the moment the performer and audience both hope for.

the song ends and my friend breaks my reverie.

"that bitch can sing." he declares.

that broke the spell on me because the word *bitch* really bothered me. since then, i have become immune to the usage of *bitch* the way ten year olds these days utilize the word *suck*. it has become standard issue. a lot of young of young women these days don't mind being referred to as a bitch. in the right context, *bitch* has replaced *dame*, *chick*, or *babe*. it has this "brick house" sort of hip usage about it.

but the word has a foul connotation to it. its usage is just one more bastardization of the language. maybe we all work too hard, and don't try hard enough anymore to be anything but cynical.

so what word would i use? i should like to find a word that just works to describe a woman i like. forget politically correct, this is my idea of a woman so excuse me if i choose a word that does not connote something you command by whistling, or breed, or coddle, or pay for.

new slang evolves when you're not thinking about it. it happens spontaneously, and sticks with tenacity in the vocabulary. these are the best words, words like *rock and roll*, or *floppy disk*.

i was reminded of a time a few years back when i was living down south. my friend rich and i were working in his basement shop. we came upstairs to the kitchen to have a beer. from outside came the sound of a woman singing. her song must've been an old scotch or irish ballad, halting and haunting, and was richly dynamic. i forgot our work and the sweaty cold bottle at my fingertips. i had heard folk music reminiscent of her song as a child in the hills of new hampshire. so i ask rich who is singing.

"johnny," he says, "that's my merry."

later i find out his wife's name is mary, but i like my interpretation better. i think i'll use *merry* to describe a woman i like. americans like to use slang in their lives, as if they can preserve some exclusive treat for themselves until word gets around.

so i say again. a *merry*, a *merry* should sing it.

Johnny Welch

untitled

occasionally,  
i walk around under the influence of the belief  
that i know the answers to  
questions. like who  
i am. like where  
i am going. like why  
i am here.

once,  
it finally dawned on me. i am a speck of dust embedded in a  
smudge. on the shoulder of  
a gnat. attached to the leg of  
a flea. which is living in the ear of  
a mouse. who nests in the packing material of  
a crate. which is placed down in the hold of  
- a cargo ship. floating in the middle of  
the pacific.

now i ask you-and please be honest-do you actually  
think.

that a	
speck	
	in a smear
on the shoulder	
	of a gnat
on the leg	
	of a flea
in the ear	
	of a mouse
in the nest	
	in the crate
below the deck	
	of a very large ship
in the middle	
	of the ocean
can really know	who
they are?	where
they are?	why
they are?	

MJR

# *candidly*

*(for michael)*

candidly  
i caught the ache of thunder  
and relief  
bellowing through your words  
your face  
twisted into various knots of confusion  
the remains of a phenomenon  
that carefully traps  
and clenches  
holds the sense of self in a vise of madness  
when and what and how would the rescue be for you?  
i ask for reasons that  
bear no knowledge  
and act from a soreness ripping covertly beneath the chest  
an angry sobbing ache from below the belly  
like a black stick slicing across the warm membrane of the eye  
the day parading ice and granite across the fresh wound  
it hurts to home

candidly  
gentleness has its place  
but not here  
eyes and buckets of dreams  
hold only the immediate thought  
then fade in the distance of a day  
ache it out but  
know  
the calm inside  
will surge and fall  
twist and sweep as a tempest  
leaving you haggard,  
striving,  
stronger,  
renewed...  
then you'll know  
it's okay  
to be alone.

*Teresa M. Diederich*





# the phoenix chronicles

1

## *Beginning the Quest*

(“... No armor ...”)

My name is Josh Phoenix. I had a very odd experience last summer, and this seems to be the best forum with which to tell you about it. Let me warn you, you won't believe this as fact, but do us both a favor and try.

I was on my deck relaxing in the late afternoon sun, lying face-down on an old lawn chair and trying to decide what to do about my latest job, which I couldn't stand. Of course, I needed the money, so I couldn't just quit . . . but you don't really want to hear about that. Something suddenly fell gently on my back. It was too heavy to be a bird dropping, and it was dry besides, so I rolled over carefully and caught it before it hit the flooring. It turned out to be a weighted letter, addressed to me. I got up quickly and looked around to try and find who had thrown it, even going out to the street and checking there. No one.

I went back to my lawn chair and started reading.

*“Dear Joshua,*

*You won't believe this letter any more than those whom you tell about this experience will, but bear with me. You have been chosen—not by me; maybe by destiny herself—for a job so important that only a human of a specific calling and mindset may accomplish it. We need you to find, restore, and empower the spirit-armor of times so long past that even the legends about them are forgotten.”*

At this point, I stopped reading, convinced it was all a hoax, like maybe something out of “The X-files.” I don't know what or why, but something made me decide to return to the letter rather than just crumple and throw it away.

*“By reading this far, you have already accepted the challenge laid before you. You have five quests to complete before you will be ready to challenge the Realmlord. The first of these is the quest for the Earthen. Dress yourself and return to the deck; you will know what to do when the time comes.”*

It was unsigned. I don't know exactly why, but I felt compelled, somehow, to do as the letter said. Maybe it was just that I was intrigued by the insistence that I'd already accepted the challenge just by reading a letter. (Maybe not.) Whatever my reasons, I went inside and pulled on a t-shirt, sneakers, and a baseball cap, as well as snapping off the latest strings of my cut-off jeans. When I went back outside, rising from the edge of my deck by the stairs was a seven-foot-tall . . . portal is the only way I can describe it. So I carefully stepped through.





(continued...)

I was . . . someplace else. Where, I don't exactly know. For all I know, it was *somewhen* else; whatever the case, it was heavily wooded; I was near a running stream, so I decided to follow it; after all, people are most often found near water, so unless I was in a place or time where there were no people, I was bound to come across somebody sooner or later.

It was sooner. I suddenly found myself stumbling out of the woods across a boundary line between bracken and wildgrass that was so sharp it had to have been either sliced by a knife or cultivated meticulously for years. A small cottage stood at the other end of the clearing. I walked over and knocked on the door, and was promptly startled by the voice from inside. It sounded exactly like what I remembered my long-dead father's voice to have been.

"Come in, come in! I've been expecting you, young Joshua." I cautiously opened the door and peeked around it. On the other side, at a low, rough-hewn wooden table, sat an older man in long baggy robes. He was smoking a pipe--with the same brand of tobacco my father used to use, by the smell of it--and a cup of tea was on the table in front of him.

He looked up after a while, and seemed surprised that I was just standing there. "Come in, sit down. Have a cup of tea. Relax. Any questions?" He waved a hand in an unfamiliar gesture, and a chair across from him slid out, a steaming cup of liquid that I assumed was tea materialized in front of the other chair, and some unseen force gently pushed me into the room, where, since I felt standing was impolite after I'd been asked to sit, I moved over to the chair and used it.

"So. Any questions? My name is Taliesin, and yes, I sent you that letter, and since you're sitting here, I assume it was received, even if not favorably."

"All right, as long as I have the chance, I do have at least one question; why me?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Why do they always ask that? Because, my boy, you are the only one currently alive that fits all the parameters, and we don't have the time to wait for someone else to come along."

"Okay, I'll buy that, even if I don't understand it. Who's this 'we' you keep referring to?"

"We' are myself and some other members of a 'council' of relatively immortal men; we decide, loosely, the direction that the earth will take in its development for the next century or so."

"I won't touch that one. Uhh . . . what am I looking for? And how do I find it; or for that matter, know it when I do?"

He held up a card with a picture of a man in Norse battle armor on it.

"You must first find this. It is the Spiritarmor of Earth. Too, you must find



(continued...)

the Earthring, for them both to be fully capable of assimilating both each other and the other armors. That I can help you with. --The Eartharmor is the basis for the other four, as well as being the foundation from which the others gain their strength. The Earthring is the starting point for the five-part Spiritswords, and serves the same function as the Eartharmor. One thing you must remember, if you are to wield the Spiritarmor and swords correctly and at full strength, and that is that *no armor is empty, if the spirit within lives on.*" He took me outside and led me to a secluded corner of his clearing. "Dig here; you will find the first part of what you need. I dare not say more, except that when you find it, put it on immediately; if you do not, they can be taken, and we cannot afford that now. When you have found them, come back to the cottage and I will be able to tell you what next to do."

I dug. About a foot down, I found a small box which contained two gold rings. Remembering Taliesin's words, I put them on quickly, one on each hand. They slowly contracted, vanishing as they did, until finally they had become a part of my hand! I went back to the cabin and asked Taliesin what to do.

"Concentrate on the rings; they will seem to tug you in the direction of the location of the armor. The closer you are to the Eartharmor, the stronger the tug will be. When you are at the hiding place, nothing at all will come from the rings."

I went outside and sat in the middle of the field. Not entirely sure how to go about the finding, I tried to clear my mind of everything but the rings. Suddenly I was on my feet and walking toward the south. Surprised, I stopped thinking about the rings, and so stopped moving. Hurriedly, I concentrated again and resumed my southward movement. About an hour later, at which I must have walked at least a mile and a half, they stopped moving me, and I looked around.

From inside an oak nearby came a grunting, and I stepped over to it, intrigued. For no good reason, I raised my hands and placed them against the tree, one opposite the other. A split developed down the outside of the tree closest to me, and scared now, I stepped back. Two lines glowing golden connected my middle fingers to the fracture in the tree, which continued to widen. It gradually fell away from a statue of a beautiful lady hidden in the middle, and the two sides of the oak crashed to the ground, one north and one south. I was knocked off my feet by the resulting concussion of sound, but luckily, didn't hit my head. I got up and approached what I knew had to be the Eartharmor, drawn on by the lines of light from my hands.

I reached up to take the armor down from its place on the low oaken stump, which now appeared to be silver from the light. When I touched the armor, it began to fuse with my body, much as the Rings had earlier. I dropped to my knees, overwhelmed by the sheer feeling of it. I can't describe it; it's sort of like being born, knowing all there is to know about that particular life, and dying again, all in the same instant. There's no way for me to really get the idea across without letting you experience it for yourself. In some way, I know that I feel sorry for all the millions of people who never have the chance to experience this energy state, and there being nothing I can do about it makes me all the sorrier for myself.





(continued...)

Taliesin came up behind me a while later and held out a disk with the picture of the Eartharmor inscribed on a panel that took up one-fifth of the whole. He said, "Take this medallion as well, and hang it around your neck. Your next quest is to find the Windarmor, medallion and glove; they will be the next part of the five-part system that will together mean the destruction of the Realmlord."

2

### *Quest for the Wind*

("... is empty ...")

Another trip via portal, this one leading us north (Taliesin had joined me) to what looked like the Scottish highlands; very open and very isolated.

Taliesin had told me that I could use one type of the Spiritbond to lead me to the next; that is, armor to armor, medallion to medallion, and weapon to weapon. He also told me that the next quest, the search for what he called the Aerien would be nowhere near as easy as the first. This time, the picture he showed me was of a man in a Robin Hood-era costume, telling me it was the Windarmor. I somehow knew that the first part of this quest would be to find the Windmedallion.

I concentrated as I'd learned from finding what Taliesin had called the Earthen, and eventually my path led me to a huge boulder that appeared to be naturally shaped into what was, as nearly as I could tell, a perfect sphere. I looked at Taliesin, but he only shook his head and said, "Think. You will find the way."

It must have been three hours that I stood there before my mind finally grew blank enough to let my instinct take over. I'd slipped into a cross-legged sitting position while waiting, and suddenly I was on my feet and moving toward the rock. Having learned from past experiences, I went with it. I still don't know where it came from, but suddenly, rolling up from deep inside me, came the words I needed.

"*I call upon the power of the Rings of Earth!*" I boomed it out, my voice amplified by the power I could feel growing within me. I raised my clenched fists, and the Rings, or at least the places where they had become part of me, glowed and extended to form golden brass knuckles. Scarcely knowing why I did so, I stepped forward and smashed my fists into the closest side of the huge boulder.

It exploded.

Taliesin dove for cover, scanty as it was on that open plain. I stood rooted to the spot, caught by the exhilaration of the release of the power contained in the Rings while dust rained down upon and around me. The dust finally settled, and where the rock had been was left only a small pile of dust, on which was lying a disc inscribed with the same picture Taliesin had shown me to represent the Windarmor. As I held it up and my brass knuckles touched it, all three glowed and vanished. The second



(continued...)

panel on my medallion now had the Aerien picture inscribed upon it.

Taliesin grinned, either pleased or relieved by something. “Good; it has accepted you as the Spiritbonded. If it had not, the Eartharmor would have been expelled from your abilities and awareness, possibly going to combine with the Windarmor in whoever is controlling it now. Once one Spiritarmor has accepted you by free choice, the rest cannot help but comply; they know their bearer, and the key to each of the five parts is the Spiritmedallion.” More he would not or could not say. Darkness fell, preventing us from continuing on in the quest that day.

Before we made camp, Taliesin reached into his pack and brought out a pair of high-power, high-quality binoculars. “Use them to see the night sky for the first time in all its beauty; it is a moonless night, so nothing will be obscured for he who is the rightful Bearer. These will help you see clearer, farther than you ever knew was possible. The stars often have messages for those with the ability to see.”

I didn’t really understand, but I took the instrument anyway. Laying on my back and pulling a blanket up to my chest, for it was a chilly night, I relaxed and chose a star; it was the brightest one I could see. I focused in on it and gasped at its majestic blue-white beauty. Enthralled, I could only stare, and must have been that way for maybe half an hour before Taliesin started to snore, breaking my trance. I moved the binoculars across the sky, slowing for no reason as I got closer to the area directly above me. As I reached the zenith, I began hearing a faint chiming, almost light enough so that I couldn’t hear it. It got clearer as I focused in on a fuzzy patch of stars which soon resolved themselves into what looked like a galaxy. I began hearing lyrics to the chimes, almost as though the stars were singing at me.

*“In defeat are the greatest victories won,*

*You can find a path no foot will trod,*

*From these deeds will songs be sung,*

*Of battles fought in light and fog.”*

On that note, I fell asleep.

When Taliesin woke me the next day, the sun was already high; by my watch, it was after ten. “Today you should try to find the Windarmor; if you can once gain that, the Windgloves will be a simple task.” We finished breaking camp and headed north toward a high outcropping that stretched itself above us, the cliff face obviously offering perches to hundreds of seagulls, as evidenced by the myriad white streaks.

We walked for about two hours, eventually reaching the top. There was no-one else on the clifftop, nowhere that I could tell that the Armor could have been hidden. By his actions, Taliesin thought otherwise. He walked to the very edge of the cliff, the wind buffeting his robes throughout. He raised both arms, gripping his walking staff





(continued...)

in one, and called out, "The Bearer has come to Challenge for his own! Let the voice of the heavens speak, and the Holder of the Aerien show himself, that the Challenge be answered! Show me the Armor of Wind!"

With a roar of tumultuous thunder, a tornado rushed up and engulfed him. I cried out and took a step forward, only to have the clouds dissipate and two figures stride down toward me, the larger quickly outdistancing the other. She advanced to where I waited and hefted a sword.

"Prepare to die, mortal," she spat. "There's no way that an insignificant pest like you is the true Bearer of the Five Armors!"

That did it. Not really knowing what I was doing, I lifted the medallion in both hands, and yelled, "By the Powers of the Armor of Earth, I command you! Do me no harm, surrender the Windarmor, and return to whence you came!"

She laughed in my face. "Fat chance, puny human." She managed to make the designation sound like a curse. So I did the only thing I could.

I concentrated on the medallion and called out, "*I call upon the power of the Spiritarmor of Earth to protect me and the power of the Rings of Earth to be my strength!*"

Power indeed. It surged through my body as if I were a lightning rod, and my whole form began glowing. I tensed, and armor materialized everywhere. The brass knuckles I'd used on the boulder were back, too. "Still think me puny? This medallion says that only I have the right to wear that armor, and since by the looks of things I'll have to take it by force, that's what I'll do." Did I mention that I have a wicked temper?

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw her eyes widen just before she started swinging at me. I blocked with the knuckles, which somehow flashed to shieldpanels just before contact and back again just after. Soon I got tired of just parrying and began attacking her. She swallowed hard and backed up until she reached an impenetrable wall; Taliesin's outstretched staff. I kept blocking her now-desperate thrusts and slashes with one hand, cocked the other, and let fly with a wild right hook. She took it on the sword, and the sword melted. There's no other way to describe it. It glowed red and began dripping until finally the only thing left was a slowly disintegrating lump near the hilt, which she quickly dropped. I pulled back, and when she swung her fists at me, I grabbed her wrists. The Windarmor, having once made contact with the Bearer, was instantly absorbed into me. I don't know where my opponent went. The last I saw of her, she was saluting me, and then I saw only a tornado's funnel moving off into the northern sky.

The impact that the battle and then the absorption had taken on me was tremendous, and only then did I start to feel it. I released the medallion, letting the armor slip back to nothingness, and collapsed, unconscious.

Taliesin was waiting with coffee when I awakened. Don't ask me where he got it;



(continued...)

the only answer I got was 'here and there.' He congratulated me, then said, "This was left after the battle."

He handed me a small silver box. Inside I found a pair of black fingerless gloves. I slipped them on, and they, too, became a part of my hands. I slipped back to sleep, unable even to rejoice that another part of the quest was done.

When next I woke up, Taliesin held out a woodcut of what he said was the Firearmor. "This is the next step."

Finally rested, I grinned and stood up. The now-familiar portal was waiting, ready to take us to wherever the Ignaten waited.

3

### *The Quest for Fire*

("... if the spirit ...")

The portal took us to the crater's edge of what I hoped was a dormant volcano. Taliesin said, "We rest here; you need to regain your strength. When the time has come, you will know."

We spent two days there, just waiting and resting. Taliesin taught me what he knew about the powers of the Earth and Windarmors, and how to use them together. Something about him reminded me of my brother, as well as my dad. I was only six when he . . . disappeared. I still don't know whether he died, was kidnapped, or what-have-you. I just know that one day he left and didn't come home.

During that time, I learned more and more about the night sky, mostly using the binoculars. A good fifty-power pair can really reveal a lot about our universe, you know that?

Some of what I learned about the stars I don't really remember. I still have the binoculars; Taliesin made me a gift of them. With what I do remember, I could get a degree, write a textbook, or go teach somewhere.

My two days of rest seeming to be all that Taliesin thought I needed, we set out around the lip of the crater to where there was a path leading down into the center.

When we had almost reached the center, Taliesin said, "I have to wait here this time. Go to the centerpoint and summon the Guardian for the Ignaten Challenge."

Not really sure what to do, I stepped out and soon reached the midpoint of the





(continued...)

basin. I turned back to look at Taliesin, only to have him nod at me encouragingly. I took a deep breath and shouted, "I am the true Bearer of the Spiritarmors, and I have come to Challenge the Guardian of the Firearmor for what is mine! Let the voice of the fire speak, and the Holder of the Ignaten show himself, that the Challenge be answered! Show me the Armor of Fire!"

The rock in front of me split and fractured, groaning as if in agony. It sank quickly out of sight, and a thin reed of sulfur vapor arose from the pit that was left. A column of fire suddenly shot from the well, reaching a height of several times mine. It receded almost faster than it had appeared, leaving in its place a giant who stepped back to get a better look at the one who had summoned him.

He thundered, "You are the Bearer? You will indeed have to have strength to defeat me, little man. Are you ready?"

I found my voice and cried, "The medallion I wear gives me the right to wield the armors; the power in my spirit gives me the strength to Challenge for yours. Are *you* ready?"

He laughed. "I like your style, little man. As the Challenged, I claim right of choice. And I choose to make this a fair fight; let the Challenge be of minds, not bodies. Riddle me this, small one: What is it that has three incarnations, and also has five? What has need of only five powers, though also has more? And what, even when vacant, still has something within?"

I sat heavily, forgetting that I was standing on rock and surprised that I would only have to think. I didn't realize how tough the thinking would be, though.

Eventually I answered him. "Your answers, great being, are these: That which has three incarnations and five is the Spiritbond. That which has five powers and more is a human. That which contains something even when vacant is a human mind. Now, it is your turn. What is it that has to have five to live, but only needs one to die?"

The giant swore. "Damn, you are right, little man. And the answer to your riddle is 'a human.'" Okay, so it wasn't a very good riddle; I had to come up with it there on the spot.

Not really sure how, but thinking he'd been tricked, the giant looked at me suspiciously. Finally he asked, "What is a box without hinges, key, or lid, with golden treasure that inside is hid?" I got it after a bit of work--the answer was an egg--and asked another of my own. "Nothing stands before it; all things go from it; it rusts, kills, ruins, and grinds; not even mountains can hold against it; what is it?" It was a bit easy, but it's still usually a stumper. He said "Time, little man," and laughed at how easily he had gotten it. Then he asked me, "All my parts are different, yet I am made of many identical things; each is made of myriad small parts, each generic in its way; what am I?" After quite a while, I finally came up with an answer; a library full of books.



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We continued trading riddles for the better part of the morning, until finally he said, "Ach, I concede. Take my hand to receive the Firearmor."

Oh, how trusting a fool is mortal man! I reached up, and he suddenly leaned down and grabbed me, careful not to touch my skin, and lifted me to his shoulders.

"Now, mortal, you will be tested! The right of Challenge is only for he who holds the true Spiritmedallion; let me see yours."

I still don't know why I wasn't afraid; I calmly took the disc in both hands, lifted it toward his eye, and called out, "By the powers and the rights bestowed upon me as the true Bearer of the Spiritarmors, I bid you; put me down!" It hadn't worked on the Guardian of the Wind because it wasn't that easy to win a Challenge. On this giant, however, the compulsion worked like a charm, no pun intended. He grunted and did so, carefully.

I called up toward him, "Now, by right of victory in the Challenge, I implore you! Do not stall any further; release the Firearmor to me!"

He sighed. "Only the Bearer would dare command Prometheus in such a fashion; not even Zeus himself had any real power over me. It is yours; take it." And he leaned over, put me down, and rested his arm on the ground in front of me.

I reached out and gently placed my hands upon his fiery skin, waiting for the shock of absorption. Before it came, I felt for a single, agonizing instant the true power incarnate within him. It seared my hands, and the searing traveled up through my arms. I was about to pull away when I realized that this was how the Firearmor was transferred from Guardian to Bearer.

Prometheus said, "Remember this, young Bearer. If you have need, call the Armor out, and it will be so." Then he summoned his pillar of fire again and when it was gone, so was he. The pit in the ground had disappeared as well.

The absorption was still going on, and I dropped to the ground, the burning continuing just under my skin. When it was finally over, I slept.

The next morning, Taliesin woke me and said, "Hurry. There's a whirlwind over there; it appeared about a minute ago. And it's coming toward us."

I said, "Then stand behind me." I summoned the power of the Windgloves, and merging them with the powers of the Eartharmor in order to hold me steady, I held out my hands, palms out.

"I call upon the elemental Winds; break this advance where it stands!" A reversing spin erupted from the centers of the Gloves, slowing the whirlwind down until it dropped what was within. Several pounds of dirt, some stray leaves, and a metallic disc fell to the ground about five feet in front of me. I stepped forward and reached down to the disc. As soon as I touched it, it glowed and slowly dissipated into a wisp of smoke. The third panel on my medallion now had the Firearmor symbol in it.

Taliesin came up and clapped me on the back, then said, "You learn your lessons





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well, Joshua. Keep looking to the skies for answers and you will go far. Come. We still have much to do.” With that, he strode out in front of me. It was then that I decided once and for all to ask him about my family. Before I had the chance, however, we were already at the path up the side of the crater, and neither of us had any breath left for talking.

That night, he pointed out various places in the sky that would reveal more of the sky’s beauty; the Andromeda Galaxy and Orion Nebula; the Beehive and Pleiades stellar clusters, just to name a few.

The next day, I searched for the Fireweapon using the two I already had. The path they took me down led eastward from the crater. Eventually I pulled up at a hole in the ground, Taliesin right behind me. I didn’t know what to do, so I just waited, calling on the Earth and Wind weapons just in case.

As I finished summoning the Windgloves, a gout of fire shot up from the ground and I reacted on instinct, lifting my hands and using the Windgloves to extinguish the flames. Something dropped back toward the pit, and I caught it before it slipped back into the hole. It was the weapon I’d come here after; the Firebracelets. I slipped them on, and they connected themselves with chains to the Earthrings, then all three weapons disappeared into my arms.

Taliesin held up the picture of the Waterarmor; the Liquen, as he called it. Then he pointed to where another portal waited to take us westward.

4

### *Questing for Water*

(“... within ...”)

We ended up on the eastern bank of a huge lake; a river flowed past us into the main body of water not fifty yards to our left. I needed a break after all the walking we’d been doing, so for once, I was the one to call a halt. We camped on the shoreline that night, watching as a brief rain shower soaked the opposite side of the lake and dissipated before ever reaching even as far as the center, where an island waited.

Finally I turned to Taliesin. “You know, there’s some things I’ve been wondering about.”

“Such as?” He looked vaguely worried.

“Oh, such as why you smoke the same brand of pipe tobacco as my father, or why your voice sounds like his, just for starters. I know it’s not even close to reason-



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able to accuse you of anything just because you happen to like the same 'baccy, but I'm really getting curious. Are you my father, or even related to him somehow?"

For a moment he looked relieved, then shocked. He even chuckled a bit. "Your father? Come now, lad. Surely you don't believe that I, a seven-hundred-year-old man, could have fathered you? Though I must admit, your mother was quite beautiful, as such things go . . ."

I just looked at him as he rambled on about all the ways such a thing was either impossible or not feasible. Eventually he looked back up at me. "You're quite perceptive; none of us thought that you would remember your brother quite so well as you seem to have. Yes, I am your uncle, young Joshua. I didn't like having to hide it from you, but the Council overruled me, saying that it would throw the Quest onto a tangent if you knew."

I didn't care what excuses he tried to make; I just wanted to know what happened to my brother. "You will know, soon enough, lad," he said sadly. He waved a hand, and I drifted off to sleep; as far as I can remember, that's the only time, aside from our first meeting, that Taliesin used magic on me without my consent.

When I awoke the next morning, I had no recollection of the conversation. A pretty little coracle, painted blue and looking for all the world as if it was grinning, was waiting, ready to take us to the island we'd seen upon arrival.

We struggled our way into the craft, and it began moving on its own. Several minutes later, it pulled up at a small breakwater extending away from the island, and we climbed out. The little boat slowly vanished once both of us were on land and safely balanced.

Taliesin and I made our way up the small spur, glad to rest once we'd reached somewhat more solid ground. I wanted the weapons first, but Taliesin disagreed. "I think you should go for the medallion, Josh. There's no telling what might happen when we're this close to the end of the searching." I didn't really want to get the medallion first, but I also didn't want to start arguing now.

I concentrated on the disc around my neck within my wrists, and it led me off, Taliesin following in my wake. I admit, I was sullen. Aren't you, usually, when you don't think things are going the way you want?

As we approached what looked like a small clearing, a wall of fire sprung up, apparently encircling the glade. I activated the Firearmor and all three weapons I had acquired, and cautiously stepped through the flames, feeling only a tingling as the Armor compensated for the heat. In the center of the glade was a knee-high square pedestal, on which rested a metal box.

I picked up the case and opened it. Inside rested the Waterdisc, and it, too, became part of the Spiritmedallion; four panels were now filled.





(continued...)

I went back through the flames, and said to Taliesin, "Okay, I've got the medalion; happy now?"

He smiled sadly, apparently having decided that if I was going to be petulant, there would be no reasoning with me.

Now I *was* going after the weapon, and I would have brooked no arguments, so it's a good thing there were none.

I led Taliesin around that wooded island for the better part of a couple of hours, eventually ending up in what looked like the same meadow, even though it couldn't have been. For one thing, the pedestal in the center was taller, and there were no flames surrounding the field. A tall, dark-haired, familiar-looking man stood across the clearing from me, and I somehow knew that he was there for the same reason I was; to get the Waterweapons. We both saw each other and realized the other's intent at the same time, and thus reached the pedestal at the same moment, each of us seizing one of the two weapons. They were, or looked to be, the handgrips for a pair of swords. I could see that my opponent's new weapon was identical to mine.

Anyway, he activated the Waterarmor, and I realized that he was the Keeper I'd come to Challenge. I called on the Firearmor, as well as the three Weapons that I controlled, and they began glowing. The Waterguard that I held began to glow at the same moment as his, but the light from them wasn't the pure brilliance that the rest were. Instead, they both had a sickly, dull greenish aura to them. Not only that, but his armor was strangely vaporish; it kept shifting in places so that I couldn't always see it clearly.

Taliesin called from the edge of the clearing. "Josh! There is something you need to know about him! He is your brother!" I looked up in shock, almost dropping the Waterguard that I held. That explained the familiarity.

The man facing me looked over at Taliesin. "So, uncle. You have raised him well, though I fear it was in vain. The Realmlord, my master, will have the Armors, and--" He seemed to change in mid-sentence from an egotistical brute to a man who has lost his way and is deathly scared. "--I can't break his control over me. Can you help me? Please?" The pleading in his voice nearly broke my heart, and I took a step forward before Taliesin shouted, "No, Josh! The Realmlord could retake his command at any moment, and you would be wide for an attack." I don't know if I consciously understood that he was trying to protect both me and my brother, albeit not very well. Not well because my brother had already known what he was while I hadn't, so I stood shocked for a moment, giving my opponent the time to activate the powers of his Guard.

A beam of light like the lightsabers from 'Star Wars' shot out from the upper end of the weapon, and Taliesin yelled, "Josh! Wait! You don't have to fight him; use your head!"

With a start, I knew what he meant. I activated my own Guard's lightsaber and



*(continued...)*

stepped back. I shouted, "Let the voice of the ocean speak, and the true Keeper of the Liquen show himself, that the Challenge be answered! Show me the Armor of Water!"

A roaring sound came from all around us, muffled by the forestation between us and the lake. Then a plume of water shot straight into the air from the east, crashing down and dissipating to reveal a semi-transparent man standing on the eastern edge of the glade; he was holding a crystal trident. He laughed and pointed it at my brother. "Thou, Seth. Thou hast my Armor, and I want it back!" A ray of light shot from the spear to my brother's chest, and contracted again just as quickly. The glow of the Waterarmor died from Seth's form, and reassembled on the clear man. "I am Triton, and I am the Keeper of the Waterarmor!" The Armor was solid on Triton; no shifting was going on there. Seth, now freed of the Armor's influence on one who was not a Guardian or Bearer as well as the Realmlord's control via the Armor, came quickly over to me and said, "We have to merge for this. There's no time now to explain. Just give me your hand. Taliesin, you know what you have to do." My uncle nodded, though he didn't look like he'd enjoy doing it. As our palms touched, Taliesin, standing in back of us, raised his hands over his head. A pure brilliance that wasn't light flowed from his hands to the tops of our heads, and we began to merge. I felt myself growing taller, extending up and out to fill his frame. For an instant, I saw out of his eyes, and, I assume, he out of mine. Then we were joined, and a rush of memories and emotions flooded into me. When the assault from within eased, I looked over at Taliesin and, knowing what he had done for me . . . us and said, "Thank you, uncle."

He inclined his head, and as he looked up, Triton charged at me. Since I was now holding both Waterguards--and they were glowing cleanly--I blocked his first attack, and swung at the crystal spear. It resisted my first few attacks, then suddenly shattered without warning.

Triton looked down at the stump of his defunct weapon, then up at me. Slowly, he kneeled. "Thou art truly the Bearer of the Spiritarmors. I yield to thee; receive the Armor as thou wilt." I leaned down and placed my hands in his; the shock of absorption came as I expected, but for part of me, it was a return to a state I knew; I welcomed the Armor as it returned to my control.

Triton stood and raised his hands; the column of water crashed once again, and he was gone.

We traveled for another hour until we reached the place where the next portal waited.





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5

*And Thunder!!*

(“. . . lives on . . .”)

The explosive encounter with my brother had left me drained of energy, not even able to get up from where the portal deposited us, which was apparently in the middle of open desert. After we rested, and then an hour of walking, however, I saw some signs: DANGER! NUCLEAR REACTION TEST SITE! and SECURED GOVERNMENT AREA; UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT!

I turned to Taliesin. “Uhh . . . I think you’d better wait here this time. If I use all the Armors that I’ve got so far at once, I’ll be safe. Besides, with all these sand dunes they’ll never see me.”

He agreed, and I walked off a short distance and raised the medallion. “I call on the Powers of the Elemental Armors for my defense, and the Powers of the Elemental Weapons to be my strength!” I glowed through four different colors in series; green, yellow, red, and blue. When the light died away, I was encased in full plate mail, all except for my hands, which had the Rings, Gloves, and Bracelets assembled together, with inactive lightsabers formed from the Waterguards attached via the Rings.

I turned and waved to him, then set out in the direction that the pull from the medallion was taking me. After an hour or so of walking, one featureless sand dune after another showing its slope in front of me, I heard a high-pitched whistling sound from above. I activated the lightsabers and looked up, only to find a warhead screaming toward me. Panicked, I could do nothing but raise my arms above my head and cower, waiting for the blast.

It never came. Well, that’s wrong, it did, but not as I expected. My defensive action had detonated the bomb above me, and somehow formed a cone of radiative shadow around me. I was standing in the only patch of unfused sand left within the blast radius, and at my feet, just outside the safe patch, lay a disc with the Thunderarmor pictured on it. I disabled the lightsabers and picked it up. Though like the others, it began to glow, this one expanded rather than vanishing. Abruptly, I could hear a voice. Whether it was audible or not wasn’t a factor; I could hear it anyway.

“To the young warrior Joshua, Greetings from one who has watched your progress with great interest. I am the Guardian of the Armor of Thunder, and I have awaited this moment eagerly. But we are not fated to meet for some time yet; only when you find and finally control the Thundersabers will I be released to come to you. This message is linked to you alone; you must find the Sabers before you find the Armor, and if you manage to find me and the Armor first, I will, because I must, destroy you. For anyone else finding this disc, it will integrate with the Spiritmedallion as naturally as the other four. Fare thee well until we twain shall meet.”

Perplexed, but mindful of the message, I decided to take my unknown watcher’s



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advice; I concentrated on the Weapons and went . . . up?

I was slowly rising into the desert sky. I panicked and fell about a foot. Unable to keep my balance, I fell to the ground but was soon floating upward again. You know how, whenever you're doing something requiring balance in the air, someone always tells you not to look down? They're right; don't. I fell more than a mile the first time I looked down. Not something you want to do for a living--or for dying, for that matter.

I rose for maybe ten minutes, apparently gaining speed as time passed, for I stopped so suddenly that I was pitched forward onto my face when I did.

I was at the entrance to a chamber made of what looked like marble, but turned out to be solidified clouds. I picked myself up and walked cautiously forward through a tunnel so brightly lit that it hurt my eyes. Eventually a brighter white glow developed in the air at eye level in front of me. When it solidified and died, the Thundersabers were suspended there. I reached out and carefully slid the slots at the end of the Waterguards over the tang at the base of the blades. The five weapons all glowed in unison, until they were too bright to look at. When the light finally died after several minutes, my hands were encased in fine chain mesh gloves; the Thundersabers had become one with the Waterguards and were now long katana-type swords. I slid them into the sheaths I found hung at my waist. When they had latched home, another message intruded on my consciousness.

"Greetings again, warrior lad. Congratulations on finding the final Spiritweapon. The units the five have fused into are the Thunderswords, and they will be your greatest and best hope against the Realmlord. If you best me in the Challenge for the Thunderarmor, the five Armors will fuse similarly, both with each other and with you. Come now and discover your hardest challenge yet!"

Without any warning, the cloud floor underneath me returned to its misty form and I dropped through it. Through the first seven hundred feet, I panicked. Through the next four hundred, I screamed. Suddenly I realized that if I could control the winds with the Windarmor and Gloves, I could control my rate of fall. I concentrated on the Windarmor and, much as I was expecting it, my fall slowed until I was drifting downward. That is, I was if you can call thirty-two feet per second 'drifting.' But at least I wasn't accelerating.

I landed near Taliesin, deactivated the Armors, and walked over. "I received the Thunderswords." He looked up and smiled. "Joshua, for this last Challenge you will need all four Armors working together. Call on them again now; there isn't much time left."

Perplexed, I did so, and as I finished, a beast stepped out from behind a small dune. I gaped, and Taliesin grinned. "Joshua, meet Chiron, Keeper of the Thunderarmor. Chiron, this is the young warrior whom you have been waiting to meet." Chiron was a half-man, half-horse; a centaur. I'd obviously heard of centaurs, and him in particular, but never in any of my dreams, wildest or worst, had I expected to meet him! I drew the Thunderswords and said, "This might as well be official. Let





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the voice of the Thunder speak, and the Challenge be answered, that the true Bearer of the Armors be well served in his quest!"

The centaur smiled. "I am here, warrior, as the voice of the Thunder. I answer the Challenge. Now, prepare yourself for battle!"

He circled me slowly, and I turned to face him, the Thunderswords at the ready. Suddenly he broke into a full gallop, straight toward me. Just before he reached me, he stopped and swung a battleaxe that he hadn't held a moment earlier straight at my chest. Reflexively, not realizing I'd done it until the action was taken, I brought up the Swords to block, and stopped the slash in midair. The battleaxe vanished as it struck the Swords

He grunted by way of congratulations, and stepped back several paces. A pair of swords appeared in his hands, and he carefully approached me. We began fighting in a style that was not true kendo since it was more like fencing, though neither was it true fencing. Eventually I got lucky and managed to force his swords to the ground, whereupon they vanished. He kept pulling more weapons from somewhere, and he got more and more proficient with each succeeding type. Fortunately for me, I just kept getting luckier, barely managing to block seven arrows at once; dodging a thrown javelin in the nick of time; a shot from a crossbow never touched me, since it ricocheted off the flat of one sword and thudded into the ground a scant six inches from my foot.

This went on for several hours, until Taliesin called out from where he waited at the edge of our battlefield. But he was talking to the part of me that was Seth's knowledge and instincts. "Seth! Your amulet! Use it on the swords!"

Suddenly I wasn't in control of my arms anymore. They lifted toward my neck and pulled out a gold chain that I hadn't realized I was wearing. A pinkish ball of smoky quartz was hung on the chain. My hands, knowing how to remove the ball, did so. Then one sword was brought up so that the ball met the end of the hilt. They fused together, the hilt growing what looked like claws out and around the ball. When the other sword was placed opposite the first, the same thing happened, and the new sabre began to glow along its whole length. Then, I was back in control, whatever of Seth's knowledge had gotten me this far having run out. On instinct, I started spinning the swords, slowly bringing them above my head. The words coming from someplace within me, though not from Seth, I roared out, "*I call upon the power of the heavens to aid me in this battle!*" Then, without warning and out of a clear blue sky, twin bolts of lightning struck me and Chiron. Both of us were knocked several feet back from where we had stood. We climbed to our feet in unison, and the lightning struck again, though not from above this time. It was coming from the swords; they and the lightning drew me over to where the centaur stood, and he said, "It is true; you are the one destiny has appointed. Place your hands in mine to receive the Armor of Thunder, and may you always have the support of the powers within the five."

I reached out and absorbed the Thunderarmor; along with absorption came fusion. The five armors gathered themselves into one unit, much as had the five weapons.

Pointing to what I by now hoped was the last portal, Taliesin stood waiting as I watched Chiron depart.



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6

### *Challenging the Realmlord*

(“... A new Phoenix rises ...”)

There was a kind of wrenching shift as we entered the last portal; Taliesin explained it later when he told me that we were crossing the planes. We were supposed to end up at what Taliesin said would be the Elysium Fields; the Greek version of Paradise.

Apparently, judging by what I could see, we didn't. The whole area was like the pictures of primordial Earth; lava and volcanoes everywhere, nothing growing anywhere, except for a small patch of green growth in the middle of the acres of lava rock. We made our way to the small oasis and discovered that we had managed to arrive in Elysia. The only problem was that everything was being destroyed by the Realmlord, and the oasis was the only place left in the Plane which was safe for the sTarterus of those who resided there. The small reserve that was left was brimming over with retired souls; there wasn't enough room for the two of us to enter.

The now-tortured spirits pointed the way to where they said the source of the destruction was, and we left them with the promise of attempting to halt the chaos. When we reached the edge of the Plane, a hole in the fabric of space was awaiting us, silver lines crisscrossing within it at irregular intervals. A river of putrid, foul sludge was flowing from it. I turned to Taliesin and asked, “Since there's no way I'm stepping in that, can you trace this hole to its source and create a portal to get us there?”

He said, “I already did,” and pointed a few feet away to where yet another gateway waited for us. “This one should exit in Tarterus.” What we found when we got there was what I'd been expecting in the Elysium Fields; people laughing, dancing, et cetera. It looked like a field day from back on Terra. There was a small patch of good old fire and brimstone like I'd expected from someplace like Tarterus situated right in the middle of all the laughter and fun. We relaxed as we stepped down into the park and worked our way through the crowds to where the island of flame waited. A throne could be seen rising from the center of a crowd of impish-looking men as we approached, a handsome man seated on top. He spotted us and called down, “You've got to help me! Tarterus is going to heaven! Look around; it shouldn't be like this. These people are supposed to be suffering, not rejoicing!” We replied that we were doing our best to right the screwiness, and if he could show us the way to the root of the problem, we could get it righted that much faster. He pointed east, then with an apology for ‘old habits dying hard,’ changed his mind and pointed north.

We set off and quickly reached the place the enthroned man had referred to. It was a fountain of bubbling water welling up from another hole in space, this one right in the ground. Taliesin created another portal, telling me that this one led to--maybe--the Asphodel Meadows. Since we'd already been to both Heaven and Hell, and we were going to Asphodel, I figured there wasn't anywhere else for the Realmlord to make mischief. Before we stepped through the portal, I activated the Spiritarmors and weapons.





(continued...)

I probably needn't have bothered; nothing happened. Literally nothing; we exited the portal in the midst of an almost solid bank of fog. I looked across at Taliesin, and could barely make out a shadowy figure where he'd been. He reached over and grasped my shoulder, and we started walking forward. When I was almost clotheslined by a silvery cord hanging across our path, but stopped just before I touched it, I pulled Taliesin over to look. He said, "We seem to have gone to the Astral plane rather than Asphodel. Apparently somebody doesn't want us to go there; my spells seem to be going astray. Interesting." He mused for a few minutes, then said, "Ah. Hold tight to me, Joshua; if I lose you in this, all hope is lost." He raised both arms and called out something that made no sense; at least, no sense to me. It sounded like 'uspoderunalitan,' sort of. Then a hole opened beneath our feet and we fell into another world of mist. This time, I could see Taliesin a bit more clearly, but he didn't trust the fog, so he said, "Hold a minute, and stand behind me." When I was in position, he called out another spell, this one sounding like 'edneilietatdusedsopswhcelddellany,' which also made no sense. But it did work; the fog slowly drifted away from us, dissipating as it went. When I later asked him why he'd never said the spell for the portals, he told me that it wasn't a verbal spell, which I'm not quite sure I understand, but anyway . . .

We had fallen to the top of a large hill, one of seven surrounding a central rise at what looked like equal distances. On top of the center hill was a lone man. He said something, and a minute or so later we heard it as clearly as if he had been standing next to us. "So, the magician and his pet have come to try to stop me. Or is it the other way around; are you now given to taking orders, Taliesin? If so, then follow this one; turn around and return to your own times, for the days are short and life is not much longer. You might as well spend your last days in peace and comfort, surrounded by those you love."

I have to admit, it was an enticing proposal. It's a good thing Taliesin was there to back me up, else I might not have been able to resist him. I said, trusting that he could hear me as well as I could him, "I don't think so, Realmwimp. Prepare to eat Thunder!" He just laughed, so I grabbed Taliesin. "Can he hear us?"

My companion replied, "I don't think so, not if you aren't talking to him. It's been a while since I was here last, but the rules should be the same."

I said, "Good. See that hill over there," indicating the hillock off to my right. "Can you get yourself to it inside a couple of minutes?" He answered yes to both questions, so I sent him off, with various instructions. When he reached his knoll, I called on the Spiritweapons. Drawing the Thunderswords, I yelled, "*I call out the power of the Earthen!*" A shower of pebbles, created by Taliesin, began falling around me, and the Eartharmor slowly formed around me, then separated. When we were completely individuals, the Armor began absorbing the rocks that had fallen around me. The figure kneeled and a voice came from the shadows under the helmet, saying, "Lady Athena is your servant, warrior Phoenix." Then it vanished, only to reappear occupying the first hill to my left. The Armor looked like just a statue, though I could see a shadowy outline of Athena within it.

Then, the intensity of my calling increasing as I gained confidence, I shouted, "I



(continued...)

*call out the power of the Aerien!*" The process of separation repeated, and a small windstorm engulfed both me and the Windarmor. The Windarmor followed Athena's lead, kneeling and saying, "Lady Diana the huntress at thy service alone, young Joshua." It went to the second hill toward my left, not seeming willing to approach Taliesin. It too looked like just a statue. Then, "*I call out the power of the Ignaten!*" I felt myself growing, a pressure on the top of my head increasing as I did. A ball of flame from Taliesin infused me and the Firearmor with new life, and the Armor split away. Prometheus kneeled before me in his turn, saying, "You have done well; I am in your service, my lord." He stood and blinked out, reappearing on the third hill to my left.

Two more. "*I call out the power of the Liquen!*" A beam of light struck me from Taliesin's direction, thick enough that it couldn't have been just from his hands, and Seth and I separated back into two people. Even though I'd disliked the joining at first, now it felt as though there was a part of me missing. My brother, too, kneeled and pledged me his services before bearing the Waterarmor past Taliesin--the first Bearer who had done so--and went to the third hill on my right. And, finally, "*I call out the power of the Thunder!*" This was the strangest of all; I was being changed into a centaur, and yet I wasn't. For an instant, I saw the world through Chiron's eyes. A bolt of lightning, courtesy of Taliesin's spells, hit us and gave the Thunderarmor the energy to split away from me. Unlike the other fissions, however, this splitting left me with the weapons of Thunder. Chiron, being centauran, found it too difficult to kneel, so he merely inclined his head and said, "Thou hast done better than any of us could have hoped. We are all in thy service, lord Phoenix." He too left my hill, moving to occupy the last one left open.

Through all of this, the Realmlord had been taunting and hassling me. Now he said, "Hey, look! Five empty statues and only two pigeons. What a strange sight!" Apparently he couldn't see the Bearers inside the Armors. Too bad for him.

I called out, "*I join the Powers of the Elemental Armors with Might,*" and raised my swords, one in each hand. "*Earth!*"--from Lady Athena. A beam of light shot from the left sword to Lady Athena's raised right hand. Lady Diana called, "*Wind!*", and it burst from Lady Athena's left hand to Lady Diana's right. "*Fire!*" And it shot to Prometheus. With Seth's call of "*Water!*" the light jumped to him, and when Chiron called "*Thunder!*", it traveled to him. Taliesin raised his hands and called, "*Magic!*" The light quickly connected both he and I, and the bond between the seven of us increased in intensity as a chain reaction set itself up. From each of us in turn, me through Taliesin, another ray of brilliance shot into the sky, creating a skeletal cone of light centered over the Realmlord. I said, "Okay, Realmwimp, you've had it." Then I shouted, "*By the Powers of the Five Elementals, may the Realmlord be destroyed!*" The focus of light at the peak of the cone descended, and when it touched the Realmlord a giant blast leveled the central hill.

But it wasn't over. In the middle of the dead spot that was left, a hole into nothing could barely be seen. When we went down to investigate it, we must have triggered an explosion somehow; I woke up I don't know how much later with the Armors reabsorbed and Taliesin lying dead or unconscious nearby. For some reason, I was lying next to a pile of what looked like coal ashes.





(continued...)

7

### *Chasing the Realmlord*

(“... from the ashes of the old ...”)

I groped my way over to where Taliesin lay. When I rolled him over, his face was ashen and he wasn't breathing. I checked for a pulse and didn't find one.

He was dead.

I kneeled there for what felt like hours--and was, by my watch--crying quietly. Eventually the part of me that was Seth roused us. Unable to communicate in words, he had to resort to controlling me and sending vague feelings. So he stood me up and walked over to the hole. Then he returned control--just after we'd jumped in.

I fell for a long time; even with my watch, I couldn't tell just how long, because of a inter-planar shift somewhere in the fall. Obviously I'd been wrong about where the Realmlord could go to cause trouble; I landed hard in a field that was drenched, if that's the right word, in pure light. I felt better than I ever have before or since, as if the light was washing the negativity right out of me. Soon I lay down, letting the light soak into me, easing my wearied muscles and calming my worries. I think I fell asleep, because I woke up several hours later feeling wonderful and glowing all over. Wait a second, I thought. Glowing? Yup, I was glowing. Brilliantly lit and comfortably warm, I was. Strange things I've heard of, but this really takes the prize for the weirdest.

At the time, I suppose because of how relaxed I was, I didn't really care. I just sat up and looked around, basking in the novelty. I was on top of another hill, and about a half-mile down toward the nearest valley was a line. Not wavering, not meandering, just a straight line. It marked the border between my field and a matching one in the valley that had been full of darkness when I first saw it. Now the dark in the valley had concentrated to the size of a human figure, much as had the light on my hilltop. As one, the dark blot--which I assumed had to be the Realmlord--and I advanced toward the line between us.

Back in the Asphodel Meadows, Taliesin sat up, shook his head, and looked around. The first thing he noticed was the pile of ashes left where I'd stood when we went to investigate the hole. He spent quite a while mourning me, just as I had him, before opening a portal back to the physical plane. Once there, he went to the eastern wall of his cottage and pressed on a carefully hidden trigger. The wall dissolved to a large silvery panel, which in turn cleared to show a group of humans seated around a table. He stepped through, the wall solidifying behind him, and said, "What now? Our last hope for the worlds has been vanquished, and we have no candidates who will be ready for at least a quarter of a century. Which will certainly be far too long." The others bowed their heads in silent empathic sorrow.





*(continued...)*

On my current plane, I drew close enough to verify that my opponent was indeed the Reamlord. I activated the Elemental Armors, only to have him do the same with a Dark version! He glared at me, and said, "How are you at chess, Phoenix-pigeon?"

If he wanted to be insulting . . . "I'm a fair hand, Realmwimp. Care for a match?"

He waved a hand, and a fully set up board and two chairs materialized. "I'll be courteous to a losing man; you can be white." Geez, this guy really didn't know when to quit.

We opened with a series of classic moves, except that I opened with my queen-bishop's pawn; we both moved knights, he advanced a pawn in order to clear a bishop's path, I played a pawn to his bishop, he pulled back said bishop and I took it anyway, and so on.

Taliesin and the Council, finally overcoming their grief, began making plans to try to save at least a remnant of the human race. They kidnapped several young couples who wouldn't be missed and put them into suspended animation within a cavern where they hoped the Reamlord could not reach. They did their best to choose a wide variety of knowledgeable professionals; after all, what good is a world where everybody is a automotive mechanic? They sealed several thousand dollars worth of equipment relative to each person's area of expertise into a smaller cavern at the back of the one the people were housed in. Finally, they added the complete text of the Library of Congress, both in books and on cd-rom, to the equipment list, as well as a large amount of various grains and edible plants, both in seed and seedling form, along with the necessary how-to manuals for proper cultivation of the plant material.

Did you know that dictators tend to be sore losers? I--barely--won the chess match, and the Reamlord promptly vanished the chess table and used the Dark-infused Earthrings and Armor to augment his strength enough to start throwing boulders at me. I in turn used the Windgloves to break the stones to pebbles, and to reverse the attack. The ensuing shower of pebbles was something that, for some reason, he was unable to stop, even when he switched to his Windgloves to try to counter my defense. The Dark Eartharmor vanished under the hail, fracturing into black splinters and falling at his feet. Suddenly, surprising me, the Light Windarmor slowly disappeared, as did the corresponding panel on the Spiritmedallion.

He really got mad, and called on the power of the Firebracelets for fireballs. I doused them--and him--with a stream from the Waterguards; the Dark Firearmor hissed into smoke and disappeared, as did my Waterarmor. He sort of screamed--the only word I can think of to describe it--in apparent rage and attacked me with a small tornado, which I countered with my own Eartharmor, using it to anchor me to the ground. Carefully, keeping one foot planted, I stepped forward out of the whirlwind and punched him hard with the Rings. He flew backward about four feet, landing hard on his rump, and the tornado vanished; with it went the Dark Windarmor and the Light Eartharmor. I was left with only two panels on the medallion; Fire and Thunder.



(continued...)

The Council, deciding to try and save some conscious people, if they would listen, influenced several dozen long-haired, bearded men around the world to walk the streets with sandwich boards, each of which read, "The end is near!" In various languages, of course.

Not that anyone paid attention; after all, there were always nuts here and there. Most people who saw the 'prophets' only shook their heads and kept going; some panicked (a very few of these took to home-built rockets, most of which blew up in their back yards), and a couple of head executives at NASA decided it was time for another shuttle mission.

But, because of human nature, none of this made any difference.

The Realmlord finally got around to using his Waterguards, apparently in the hope that he could freeze me solid; it started to snow around me, and I countered with a surge of heat from the Firebracelets, thus melting the ice around me and turning the Waterarmor into steam. The Light Firearmor disappeared then, and all either of us were left with was the Thunderarmor. My opponent peered out at me through the eyeslits in his helmet. Those eyes were frightening, almost snake-like in their lack of emotion. He really had that angry glare practiced, I'll give him that. He took a step back to brace himself and used the Dark Thunderarmor to call up a lightning bolt, since he couldn't use his Thunderswords for that purpose. The noise deafened me, and the shock wave released by the blast shattered both of the Armors, though both of us still had all five Weapons.

He drew his Swords, as did I, and we rushed together, joining battle at the dividing line between Light and Dark. The concussion of the first blows struck reverberated through all the Planes, even echoing down into the hidden chambers where the Council sat and made their last minute plans before what they thought was their last days came. Taliesin stood, shocked, and turned toward a back wall of the crystal chamber. He waved a hand, and the wall cleared just in time to show them that I was still alive.

In fact, I'd just knocked the Realmlord backward, shattering his Thunderswords in the process. I placed the small quartz ball hung around my neck at the base of the two Swords, raised the assemblage over my head, and began spinning it. Then I yelled, "*By the Powers of the Swords of Thunder, I call upon the lightning of Zeus!*"

A pillar of electrical energy so powerful that it couldn't have been called lightning smashed down onto the spinning Thunderswords and was deflected at the Realmlord. Just before he and the Swords disintegrated, he saluted me.

And his lips moved in a silent "thank you".

Joshua Phoenix





## extinction

stylistic standards

he thought his profile handsome.  
universe filled with prebiotic compounds,  
tornado rips through a junkyard,  
sterilizing the planet.

on the cratered young earth

the fossils just get fried.  
sandwiched between layers of lava,  
layers of sediment that accumulated until  
the next eruption.

*Maureen Auger*

## not so perfect after all

everyone thought jordan, montana was a perfect town. it was peaceful, and people thought no one did anything wrong. true, the town was peaceful and quiet, but there was something wrong.

"camron how was your day today?" jessica asked as she met camron at his locker.

"not that much better. i'm trying so hard to ignore them, but it still hurts."

"I'll stand by you and help you," jessica commented with anger and sadness in her voice.

camron just moved to jordan, montana. he was a black teenager, and there are lots of prejudiced people, even teachers. jessica seemed to be his only friend.

"thanks, jessica. if you weren't my neighbor, and stood by me, i don't know what i would do."

"i'll help you, and try to get people to change their way."

"i don't think they will listen, but anything is worth a try."

"let's pray it does," jessica said as they walked home.

"hey, dork get out of my way," a group of kids yelled to camron.

"sorry," camron said in a low voice walking away from the kids.

"that's right! you know you don't belong."

what jessica said was talked about for weeks. Jessica changed some people, but some will never change their ways. camron now has lot more friends just because one person had the courage to stand up for what she believed in.

*Kristi Arey*





## cancer, an unrelenting disease

she was a beautiful woman, full of love, life and laughter. she was one with a lot of spunk, especially when it came to a spirited argument or a battle of sorts, and, of course, in her mind she was always the victor. however, the battle she was presently fighting was one that even she could not overcome, and eventually it would consume her, as a savage animal devours its prey.

until her hip broke mysteriously, it was thought that she was merely suffering from a pinched nerve, so being diagnosed with bone cancer was both shocking and devastating. weeks of grueling physical therapy and rehabilitation followed a painful hip replacement, and still, the worst was yet to come.

six months of chemotherapy then ensued. she suffered constantly with nausea, dry heaves, vomiting, diarrhea, and waking every morning, only to find her hair, lying in clumps upon her pillow, as well as her sense of pride and dignity. vials upon vials of medication lined her counter-top, resembling that of a pharmacy. many various medications made it necessary for each dose to be recorded meticulously into a journal, so as not to confuse one medication with another. ultimately, after all of this agonizing therapy, remission occurred.

Remission was something she had been praying for, and she was finally holding her own. at this point, she lived with the attitude of taking one day at a time, and lived each day to the fullest. her biggest joy was spending time with her grandchildren. she found a certain sense of peace and tranquility, being able to almost forget about her illness, when she was absorbed with their lives. however, she could not escape from the eventual relapse which was inevitable.

slowly, she began to slip out of remission. this was evident by the increased pain she was experiencing and her appearance in general. daily, her health seemed to fail little by little, until she could not walk without the assistance of crutches, canes, or a walker. her weakened limbs trembled, as she would attempt to seat herself. her face became riddled with pain, her helpless eyes winced, as her lips drew tightly against her teeth, for the simple task of putting her bottom into a chair caused excruciating pain. all the medication in the world could not save her, and it would not be long before her suffering would end.

as she lay upon her hospital bed, she was rapidly expiring, like that of a delicate orchid left out in the elements. her body was frail and brittle, resembling that of a malnourished bird. her skin was slate gray in appearance. to the touch, her forehead felt cool and clammy, her hands as cold as ice. but the horrifying distorted appearance of her face, which will forever be etched in my mind, expressed all of the suffering she had endured through her illness. her lower jaw appeared to almost be detached from her upper, jetting out in a desperately pathetic manner, as if it were begging for an act of compassion, a final blow, to put her out of her endless misery. with every breath she so desperately fought for, it was obvious that her demise was now imminent.

then, in an instant, with her eyes partially open yet unable to see, she softly and quietly slipped away. at last, her long and lengthy suffering was over. she had finally succumbed to the unrelenting disease that had held her prisoner for six years.

*Geralyn Roche*

she

*it's hard to replace her.* she isn't the type you can find just anywhere. no... there's a special vibrance that she brings with her everywhere. something that most everybody else misses out on during creation. where did it come from? i am not the one to say. but i know where to look for it. hell, you can't miss it, if you appreciate such things. simple, relaxed things. a smile as uplifting as the beams of the morning sun. i can't help but return the favor. simple, yet undeniably incredible.

*she isn't the type that seems overly concerned with herself.* actually, one could say that she even has little concern for herself. she doesn't wear too much makeup. doesn't showcase herself. you don't look twice. unless you happen to know her. then you never look away to begin with.

she's the kind of girl that you wonder why you don't see *more of.* you think about her when you're away, and you're always glad to see her again when you do. her honesty and charm are her pull. the mystique. the static that disrupts our everyday boundaries of beauty. oh... she's pretty, but it's small in comparison to her passion for life. her truth.

she's one of your dearest friends, if you're lucky enough to *know her.* someone you'd miss for some time if she moved away. someone who is simply fun to be with. she knows where it's at. she is at a state of being that no model or movie star can touch with all her glamour and charm.

*she is unique.* like all of us, she is human, with her flaws and weak points. but they are forgivable. for i know hundreds, maybe thousands of women who are physically more attractive than she, but she is one of the most beautiful people i know.

*Rich McMaster*

for chris, inspiration for all the ladies who represent this piece





## untitled

the jocks, the cheerleaders  
the partiers, the shy.  
familiar faces, ten years worn,  
soon to ask me  
what i've done

i sit here now  
in the crowded cafe  
thinking,  
how the hell do i answer???

to tell them the truth:  
we graduated-i met a man-was violated, losing my mind, my heart, my  
body, my innocence-drunk and drunk and drunk, with occasional breaks  
to powder my nose-moved to the city-did even more-hotel rooms ( how did  
i get here ? )-stale whiskey-syringes sold-items moved-sleazy buyers-  
until.....

alone,  
sweating, shaking violently  
in a blurred state  
i screamed  
*no more!!!!*

( i could be ashamed here, but i won't be, because...)

i found something out...

that being alone is *ok*.

that there is beauty

in even the ugliest of things.

there is such a thing as inner peace.

and though the last five years

have been sober ones,

they haven't been easy ones-

loved again, abused again, lost this, lost that

-gained a child-

and peace.

with the knowledge

that I can overcome

the greatest of challenges

and that with faith in myself

nothing is impossible.

because to live in dark but to see the light

is a gift-a kind gift.

so they will look at me-

blank faces-

"what do we say now?"

or will one,

an ignorant one,





Speak,  
so what are you doing now?

oh, i hope so,  
so that i may say.....  
your life is set,  
your roads already chosen,  
your future paved.  
but mine,  
is a future of unknown roads,  
internal sights so beautiful to see-  
they could be anything.  
i am in school now  
beginning to live my life again.  
with a child so dear to me,  
and my head held  
*high,*  
because i have lived  
the bad, the pathetic, the miserable, the sad, the powerless, the lonely,  
the lost, the abused, the dirty.....  
all of it.  
so i know where the bad roads go,  
and i will never travel them again.  
and i can see the beauty  
in even the smallest of things,  
and for that advantage,  
i am eternally grateful.

life is wonderful.

C

*untitled*

nobody come near  
me and nobody move  
its time i leave here  
and get into my own  
groove

*Anonymous*











from the WIZARDS



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